



TITLE:

<Book Reviews>Yeoh Seng Guan, ed. The Other Kuala Lumpur: Living in the Shadows of a Globalising Southeast Asian City. London and New York: Routledge, 2014, xiii+220pp.

AUTHOR(S):

Moser, Sarah

CITATION:

Moser, Sarah. <Book Reviews>Yeoh Seng Guan, ed. The Other Kuala Lumpur: Living in the Shadows of a Globalising Southeast Asian City. London and New York: Routledge, 2014, xiii+220pp.. Southeast Asian Studies 2017, 6(3): 543-546

ISSUE DATE:

2017-12

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/231043>

RIGHT:

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The Other Kuala Lumpur: Living in the Shadows of a Globalising Southeast Asian City

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The rapid growth of Asian cities in recent decades, fueled by neoliberal policies, the accelerating production of real estate, and the global circulation of unprecedented amounts of capital, has received a great deal of scholarly attention over the past two decades. Scholarship has focused particularly on the political elites and their urban policies, the command and control centers of global capital, and the movers and shakers who circulate ideas. As a counter to the study of top-down urban processes and urban spectacles, there have been growing calls for empirical studies that examine how “regular” or marginalized urban residents are affected by these sudden urban changes, how they negotiate fragmentary spaces, and the survival strategies they develop in an environment that is hostile to their presence. *The Other Kuala Lumpur: Living in the Shadows of a Globalising Southeast Asian City* is a valuable contribution to this literature. Edited by Yeoh Seng Guan, the collection seeks to illuminate the Kuala Lumpur beyond its ambitious development agenda and “world-class” aspirations. Eight essays document the lives of residents—both citizens and non-citizens—who live in the “other Kuala Lumpur,” on the fringes and in the shadows of a city undergoing massive urban change.

The Other Kuala Lumpur takes a similar approach to Yasser Elsheshtawy’s insightful work on the United Arab Emirates, particularly in *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle* (2010), a book that also seeks to illuminate the lives of subaltern residents in a city that aspires to be a world-class global city. A key difference between the contexts of Dubai and Kuala Lumpur lies in the composition of residents who are marginalized from developmentalist growth agendas. Residents of Dubai who hold Emirati citizenship are overwhelmingly Arab Muslims, while multireligious and multiethnic non-citizens are socially and spatially segregated from the Emirati population, with no path to citizenship.

In contrast, Kuala Lumpur is a far messier and more complex social milieu than Dubai. Malaysia is a highly diverse country consisting of people with a variety of ancestral origins (China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia), varied claims to the land, different legal statuses, and multiple religions (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Sikh). The highly uneven distribution of resources and opportunities introduced during the colonial era has been maintained and reproduced decades after independence, a dynamic that has been challenged through controversial preferential affirma-

tive action (Bumiputra) policies intended to redistribute power and wealth to Malays and away from ethnic Chinese. Against the backdrop of massive urban and economic changes and brewing racial, religious, and socioeconomic tension, *The Other Kuala Lumpur* provides excellent insight into the lives of those left behind by a state hungry to gain recognition as a developed nation. The collection explores the multiple competing forces that serve to marginalize and exclude particular residents of Kuala Lumpur and provides insight into the creative and unexpected ways in which minority communities find ways to work around or resist dominant forces.

Yeoh provides a strong introduction that ties the investigation of marginalized residents to broader scholarly work on capital cities in Southeast Asia, rapid urban development in Asia, and “multiple modernities” beyond the Euro-American framework. Eight empirical chapters each examine a different marginalized group (including street vendors, refugees, and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities) and illuminate their alterity, while highlighting the disjuncture between state-driven aspirations and residents’ lived realities as Kuala Lumpur tries to “keep up with the moving target of modernity and the ‘developed world’” (p. 2).

Chapter 2 examines street vending in two of Kuala Lumpur’s most important historic districts for tourism: Chinatown and Masjid India (India Mosque). In the context of “upgrading” in the districts to invigorate tourism, more regulations have been imposed on vendors. Josh Lepawsky and Rodney C. Jubilado provide an excellent analysis of how City Hall has marketed each place to accentuate a legible and largely invented mono-ethnic character of each district through iconic architecture, thus materializing notions of “tradition” and “authenticity.” At the same time, City Hall has sought to regulate street vendors’ behavior in a way that conforms to official understandings of heritage identity and is recognizable to tourists. Through an examination of street vendors, the chapter argues that globalization is not solely an external force imposed from the outside. While globalization is a driving force shaping “heritage” districts, street vendors have subaltern agency and also function as globalizers with connections to other countries through their transnational entrepreneurial activities.

Chapters 3 and 7 focus on vulnerable residents of Kuala Lumpur whose status is precarious or illegal. Richard Baxstrom investigates Brickfields, a historic working-class district generally identified (inaccurately) to be dominated by South Asians. As a consequence of the large-scale redevelopment of a rail hub and monorail located in and adjacent to Brickfields, many residents have been forced to move out or to live in uncertainty about their futures. The chapter traces the complex relationships between city planning and development, the state, the law, and everyday experiences of Brickfields residents in order to reveal the gap between the promise of the law as a set of regulations and the experience of the law by local subjects. As a vulnerable population of mainly renters and unregistered occupants of their land, residents could make no formal claims on the state to resist its development plans for their neighborhood. While most residents supported the techno-rational logic of the state’s modernization projects, they are frustrated that as non-

owners they were never informed about when or how their land would be taken, a situation that, while legal, violates their sense of justice and due process.

In Chapter 7 Alice Nah investigates how asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless people live, adapt, and cope in a securitized urban landscape designed for their exclusion. She explores the various strategies that refugees take to reduce their vulnerability, including seeking to obtain identity documents, attempting to “blend in” with the cityscape, and forming self-help groups and community organizations. Nah demonstrates how they creatively and resourcefully negotiate their precarious and unsettled position and how they become entwined in various power relations.

Chapter 4 turns to examine the Petronas Towers, the iconic twin skyscrapers that were the tallest in the world and are an integral part of Kuala Lumpur’s skyline and the national imaginary. Julian Lee argues that the spectacle of the world’s tallest towers and their Muslim designs carry an important ideological message about the country’s global aspirations and economic achievement, while excluding non-Muslim/Malay Malaysians from a powerful symbol of national progress. Despite the power of the state to project its vision onto the urban landscape, the author argues that Malaysian citizens have not passively accepted this vision. While the state attempts to smother all forms of dissent, the author documents how Malaysians have contested the state’s vision in a variety of ways, particularly through graffiti and street demonstrations.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the varied interpretations of religion by Muslims and Hindus and illustrate the ways in which this variation is reflected in the practice of worshipers. In Chapter 5 Johan Fischer examines how Muslims interpret their religious beliefs and obligations, and how this is embedded in consumption patterns among Muslims in Malaysia. Fischer suggests that Islam in Malaysia has increasingly become a “discursive tradition” with the “capability to construct, maintain and identify ‘proper Islamic’ practices” (p. 94). For some Muslims, consuming halal food becomes an important way to enact patriotic nationalism, foster a sense of authenticity, and engage in public performances of religious beliefs. In Chapter 6 Vineeta Sinha provides a fascinating look into how Hindus have responded to the recent destruction of urban temples in a variety of ways: the construction of informal, non-registered “jungle temples,” the creation of temples in private apartments and homes, temples that exist only in cyberspace, and through formal legal attempts to negotiate and resist destruction. Both chapters illustrate the wide variety of practices and beliefs among religious communities and highlight the futility of making generalizations about them.

Chapter 8, by Julian Lee, analyzes a now-canceled annual event for sexual minorities called *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Sexuality independence) within the context of Malaysia’s increasingly heteronormative laws, policies, and cultural norms. Lee provides a useful historical background on the culture of sexual diversity in the region that underscores Malaysia’s recent troubling steps toward intolerance and fundamentalism. The chapter documents how *Seksualiti Merdeka* engaged in advocacy and community strengthening, and promoted survival tactics for sexual minorities and explained the circumstances that led to its ban, while contextualizing the event within the broader

socio-political climate and wider activities of the civil society movement.

In the final chapter, S. Nagarajan and Andrew Willford examine residents of Bukit Jalil, the last plantation in Kuala Lumpur, which was destroyed around the turn of the millennium. The authors document the struggle of the rubber tappers to save their homes, Tamil primary school, and century-old Hindu temple and suggest that this struggle is representative of many silenced claims upon a contested landscape that are largely ignored in the state's narrative of national development. The residents' struggles are compounded by the perception that Indonesian migrants squatting nearby and in a similarly precarious living situation receive preferential treatment based on their racial identification with Malays and will eventually be considered Bumiputra, while Tamil Malaysians feel trapped without rights or recourse at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy solely because of their race.

A common thread that connects the chapters is the focus on the variety of creative ways in which marginalized, vulnerable, or minority communities adapt and cope. At the same time, the collection does not glamorize their struggles as "weapons of the weak" or overstate their agency in the context of deeply unequal power relations. One minor quibble I have with the collection is with the dichotomy constructed between those living "in the shadows" in the "other Kuala Lumpur" versus those living "in the light," who ostensibly enjoy power, stability, and safety. Given the intersectionality of all social identities, one does not necessarily need to be poor, a refugee, or a religious or sexual minority to experience vulnerability. Even those living mainstream lives can be marginalized in particular aspects of their lives (e.g., spousal/elder/child abuse, addiction, gender discrimination, and so on).

The Other Kuala Lumpur is a valuable reminder of the unique power of edited collections to engage in sustained exploration of a topic through multiple points of view and disciplinary perspectives, and in a variety of empirical contexts. The collection's cohesive theme and nuanced and rigorous empirical contributions make *The Other Kuala Lumpur* an excellent and highly readable addition to the scholarship on those negatively affected by urban renewal, ethno-religious nationalism, and state aspirations of globalization and modernization in Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly.

Sarah Moser

Department of Geography, McGill University

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